

The Exclusive Use of Male Language for God: An Invisible Barrier to Women Pursuing Ministry Leadership

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According to Pew Research, 55% of American evangelical congregants are female.¹ However, only 3% of American evangelical head clergy—including within egalitarian denominations—are women.²

Studies have been conducted on the barriers women face in pursuing ministry leadership and while serving as head clergy. These studies reveal that women ministers suffer from—among other things—lack of mentorship, lack of support from male pastoral staff, lower salaries than male colleagues, and challenges related to sexuality/purity traditions. One of the most common barriers identified across multiple studies is that both church staff and congregants pervasively subscribe to a patriarchal church hierarchy. Even women who serve in denominations that readily ordain female ministers experience this barrier.³

In July 2020, the Church of Sweden announced that for the first time, they had more female priests than male priests: 50.1%. Relevant here is the Church of Sweden's decision in 2017 to use gender-neutral language for God in church services. While we cannot say definitively that this decision is what brought about this increase in female head clergy, it is an important question to ask.

In a fascinating study on the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland—Finland's largest religious body—Hannele Ottshofski offers supportive evidence linking gender-neutral God language to a higher percentage of female clergy. She shares that the Finnish language has no gendered pronouns for “he” and “she.” It uses the gender-neutral term *hän* for all persons. Additionally, the Finnish language does not apply gender to occupational titles. This has minimized preconceived ideas on which jobs belong to a man (such as judge, doctor, or pastor) and which jobs belong to a woman. She believes this inclusive language is why, as of 2019, 49% of pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland were women.⁴

While no official studies link a rise in female clergy to non-gendered terminology for God, Finland's statistics open the door to valid questions concerning the American evangelical church's exclusive use of masculine language for God and its correlation to the low percentage of female head clergy.

Is God Gendered?

If we are going to examine the question of whether or not the exclusive use of male gendered terms for God is an appropriate biblical practice, we must first ask the obvious question: Does the Bible claim that God is male?

Grammar can often confuse this issue, because the ways gender is identified in English and in the biblical languages are different.

Take for instance the example shared by Joshua Robert Barron of the term “Spirit” in the biblical languages. In Hebrew, the term for God's Spirit is *ruakh*, which is grammatically feminine, so a literal translation from Hebrew would use the pronoun “she” when referring to the Spirit. In Greek, the term for Holy Spirit is *pneuma hagion*, which is grammatically neuter, so a literal translation from Greek would use the pronoun “it” when referring to the Spirit. Moving beyond the biblical languages to the Latin Vulgate, in Latin, the term for the Holy Spirit is *spiritus sanctus*, which is grammatically masculine; therefore a literal translation from Latin would refer to the Spirit as “he.”

Barron explains that whether the pronoun is masculine, feminine, or neuter is solely a “linguistic accident” based on the rules of that language.⁵ Therefore, the biblical gendered terms for God should not be assumed to be reflective of God's sex, because God is not human. Arguing for the exclusive use of masculine pronouns for God based on an English Bible translation is without merit.

What about God as father? By self-revealing as father, did God intend for us to see “him” as male?

First, we must understand that *all* the ways God self-reveals in Scripture are symbolic. The Scriptures are clear that God is Spirit—not human, not object, not animal (John 4:24, Num 23:19). Yet the Bible pictures God as a rock, a hen, a fortress, a lion, a shepherd, a mother, a father, and with many other images.

In their *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, John Walton and Craig Keener explain that during biblical times the name of a deity was of importance because the name was reflective of part of the essence of that deity. For example, the nature God refers to by self-naming as “I Am” is that of being or existing.⁶ When God reveals Godself in Scripture using human images (such as those of mother and father), God is not revealing Godself as gendered in some way but is helping us to further understand some of God's divine characteristics in language we can comprehend.

But what about Jesus calling God father?

Most prominently when we think about God as father, we think about Jesus calling God his father, which gives us good reason to ask why he chose that term. Theologian Spencer Miles Boersma dives into questions about God as father with some simple questions of his own. He asks whether Jesus ever explicitly instituted Father as a proper name, and whether or not Father language was a part of the Hebrew culture before Jesus. He affirms it is well established that Father language (including the Aramaic *Abba*) is not unique to Jesus. The Old Testament as well as intertestamental passages refer to God

using the Hebrew and Greek terms for Father. In the Old Testament, Father is a symbol used to communicate God's love to a wayward Israel. It does not replace the name Yahweh but is used alongside it as a title (Father God or God the Father). Adding the title of Father to God became a practice in many traditional Jewish prayers. Therefore, Boersma concludes that in the New Testament, when Jesus called God Father, he did not uniquely name God, but was utilizing known prayer conventions of the time.⁷

Mimi Haddad, president of CBE International, explains that during Jesus's time, one of the roles of the father was to impart inheritance. By using the relational term of Father and teaching us to do the same, Jesus established the heavenly principle that we (as children of God) are coheirs with Christ, and the inheritance we receive is God's kingdom.⁸

While the scope and depth of this article does not allow for a thorough exploration of the theological importance of Jesus calling God father, it is extraordinarily significant to this topic. In order to fulfill the prophecies laid out in Scripture, Jesus's mother had to be a human female. Mary's role as mother is what made Jesus human, and God's role as a non-human, non-gendered "father" was imperative to his deity. Amy Peeler's book *Women and the Gender of God* is an excellent resource for further examinations on the theological impact of this issue.⁹

The term Father is a relational, symbolic image, not a statement on God's gender. Nowhere does Scripture suggest that the Israelites determined God to be male and therefore decided to call God "Father." While Jesus continued the Jewish tradition of calling God Father, he also used mothering and female imagery to help us more fully understand the characteristics of God. Is calling God Father wrong? No, but according to Scripture, neither is referring to God as Mother.

In spite of the current Western church's focus on masculine imagery for God, the Bible does in fact frequently use feminine metaphors and imagery to describe God. Consider the following examples: God as a mother bird (Ps 17:8b; Ruth 2:12), as a midwife (Ps 22:9), as a she-bear (Hosea 13:8a), as a mother hen (Matt 23:37b), as a woman looking for her lost coin (Luke 15:8–10), or as a woman baking bread (Luke 13:20–21). There are also several maternal images for God in the Bible—birthing (e.g., Deut 32:18, Isa 42:14, or James 1:18) and nursing (e.g., Isa 49:15).

We must pause to ask how often we have heard the church refer to one of these Scriptures when talking about God, and how often we have heard one of these metaphors used in reference to God. Unfortunately, the exclusivity of male terms and imagery for God is reaffirmed in our churches over and over again. The Bible provides us with a myriad of beautiful descriptors and imagery with which we can express ourselves to God, yet we have chosen to limit our God language to the masculine.

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God is inclusive in "her" own language about Godself, and we must find ways to reconcile the femaleness and maleness of God in our language to appropriately reflect who God says God is—a Spirit that created both females and males as an equal reflection of Godself.

Although it may seem as if inclusive language for God is a modern idea, history says otherwise. Research shows that from the earliest

Christian Jews, whose language and portrayal of the Holy Spirit was always female,¹⁰ to the Reformers such as Calvin and Luther, the church has upheld the biblical practice of referring to God with both masculine and feminine terminology.¹¹

It was not until the modern era that church leaders, theologians, and philosophers phased out the use of the feminine, in favor of the overuse of the masculine, to meet their own agendas rather than meet the fullness of Scripture. The use of feminine terminology and imagery for God is not a modern concept. In fact, the opposite is true. The exclusive use of masculine imagery and terminology for God is the modern concept.

Understanding the Power of a Label

As expressed at the start of this article, there are many reasons for the comparative lack of women in ministry leadership in the United States. However, there is one area that is often overlooked in that research. It is overlooked because, as we will discover here, language has the power to create norms—and when something becomes a norm, we often fail to question it, or even notice it.

Because this may be an unexplored area for many readers, we will start by examining the power of verbal labels, so that we may deduce why the decision to use exclusively male pronouns for God creates an environment in which male power/hierarchy has become the norm.

In 2007, the Center for the Neural Basis of Cognition in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and the departments of psychology at Carnegie Mellon University and Stanford University came together to explore whether verbal labels affect category learning. In their study, participants were shown silhouettes of two different alien type images. One set had a more pointed head and the other set had a more rounded head. These two types of aliens were then assigned a nonsense label—either "leebish" or "grecious." The participants were then told to imagine they were on another planet to learn about alien life forms. They had to determine which aliens were okay to approach and which ones they should move away from. As each image was shown, the participants had to select an arrow moving them toward the image or away from it. If they got it correct, a bell would sound. If they got it incorrect, a buzzer would sound. One of the test groups was also provided with the labels for the image (leebish/grecious), while the other test group was not.

The group supplied with labels was significantly more accurate in determining whether it was an alien to approach or not, and

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they categorized the aliens more quickly. As a result, the research concluded that the labels facilitated category learning because they allowed the subject to more easily perceive a distinction between the categories (that is, a rounded head versus a pointy head). Naming a category causes items within that category to cohere, because the name is a reliable cue to classification. What is more, perception is affected by categorization. The human brain perceives differently labelled items as dissimilar. If two objects have different labels—no matter how similar the objects are—our brain assigns them to different categories.¹²

A similar study did several experiments to determine whether labeling (that is, naming something) has an impact on its conceptual structure. They tested both verbal and nonverbal cues by allowing the participants to hear either a word (such as “cow”) or a sound characteristic of that word (such as a “mooring” sound). Participants were then shown either a matching or mismatching picture and had to say whether or not the image matched the word or non-verbal sound. The results of these series of tests showed that hearing a word provided a much more accurate and faster identification of the picture than did the nonverbal sound. It was further determined that verbal labels not only activate conceptual representations faster, but that they are different in some way from representations activated by nonverbal cues. Over a series of seven different experiments, it was concluded that the dominant function of language is to activate a concept simply by hearing the appropriate word. Gary Lupyan calls these findings the “label feedback hypothesis.” This framework suggests that once a verbal label is activated, it will modulate ongoing perceptual processing.¹³

As a result, we see that not only does labeling something categorize it in our brains, but it also conceptualizes it and will continue to determine our perception of that thing.

The Impact of Categorizing God

Studies such as these help us understand how our brains work when we label something “male” or “female.” Something labeled male is automatically categorized in our brain as similar to the other male-like items within that category. More importantly, the brain excludes “male” items from the category of “female.” Therefore, labeling God “he” categorizes God in our minds with all things male, and most damagingly excludes God from anything female. In other words, when thinking of the term “female,” our brains tell us: “God doesn’t fit here.” That label then continues to define and drive our perception of God.

With a better understanding of how giving God a male-gendered label affects our brains, we can turn to the question: Is the exclusive use of male-gendered terminology for God a hidden barrier to women pursuing ministry leadership?

Male-Gendered Language for God: A Hidden Barrier?

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson contends that how a group names its god has a direct impact on how that community organizes every aspect of its religious system. It shapes the faith community’s identity and behavior, both corporately and individually. As such, the patriarchal labeling of God in the likeness and image of a powerful ruling male affects the legitimization of male authority in our social, political, and religious structures.¹⁴ As Mary Daly famously posits: If God is male, then the male is God.¹⁵

As reviewed in the aforementioned studies, our labels of “he,” “him,” and “father” categorize God as male. This conceptualizes our understanding and expectations of how God functions. This, in turn, excludes God from functioning within other (most particularly, female) categories.

Theologian Tanya Van Wyk has also researched the role of language in gender ideology, specifically in reference to gendered language for God. She asserts that language is used to both empower and strengthen identity. It also creates and shapes the beliefs we have regarding gender.

Most impactfully, she argues that our gender-exclusive language about God has become so normalized that it is invisible. Because of this, females internalize the messages that exclude them and even end up defending that exclusion and defending the masculine ways of speaking about God. Thus, the norm promoted by linguistic invisibility becomes recognized as legitimate. Wyk explains that this pattern of non-recognition has been passed through so many generations that it is just seen as “the way things are,” and continues to be maintained without any overt coercive activity on anyone’s part. This is how gender-exclusive language continues to justify, maintain, and perpetuate a patriarchal church culture.¹⁶

Could this linguistic invisibility and non-recognition be contributing to the ongoing beliefs about the correctness of male hierarchy within our churches?

Power Distortion

Many scholars posit that there is a power distortion created when the church holds tightly to a God-as-male image. This image directly translates into the earthly interactions of men and women. We recognize that humanity is inferior to God; therefore, this image of God as male suggests that women are inferior to men. The Bible is clear that humankind (both men and women) are to be submissive to God (e.g., James 4:7, Job 22:21, 1 Pet 5:6). However, with the view of God as male, a false hierarchy is created which now suggests that the inferior being (women), should always be submissive to men. If we can recognize and acknowledge the truth about God as being displayed in both the feminine and the masculine, the gender hierarchy between men and women cannot be sustained.¹⁷

Philosopher Luce Irigaray contends that women should not define themselves in relation to men. Rather, both men and women should define themselves in relation to Christ.¹⁸ While we do not lose our sex in Christ, we do redefine what sexuality means, under Christ.

In Gal 3:23–28, Paul is responding to questions about whether circumcision is necessary for Gentile believers. He says:

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (NRSV)

Paul's argument shows that salvation is no longer male-centric and women are no longer the "other" who must seek salvation via their husbands. The physical restriction of circumcision, which allowed only men to be "set apart," is replaced by the ability both men and women have to respond to the Spirit and choose obedience to Christ.

When we assign a male gender to God, we create a false hierarchy that suggests male is more important and authoritative than female. Humankind is to be submissive to God, but when we make God male, we suggest that the female "other" must always be submissive to the male.

Carol Christ speaks to the power of symbolism, specifically within religion. She notes that the power of symbolism—such as the image of God as father—is not dependent on rational thought, because symbols function on a much deeper level of our psyche. Symbols directly impact the deeply held attitudes that lead us to feeling comfortable with systems—social, political, and religious. Religious symbolic systems that focus exclusively on male images of God delegitimize female power and deny women the ability to fully see themselves within the divine. A woman may understand herself as being created in the image of God, but it is only by denying her sexual identity. Meanwhile, the males in her culture are free to see themselves in the image of God in the context of their full sexual identity.¹⁹

Feminist theologian Mary Daly lays out the psychological consequences of viewing God exclusively as male: If we see God as a

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father in "his" heaven, ruling over "his" people, it then becomes the "nature" of things—as divinely planned—that our society, including our churches, be male-dominated. This ideal spills over into the home, where it is seen as acceptable for a husband to dominate his wife as the representative of God "himself."²⁰ While Daly does not lay out the specific effects that embracing this ideal has on churches, it is easy to follow this line of understanding to a place where men *must* be the heads and leaders of church communities.

Haddad contends that when we oppose inclusive language for God, oppose gender-accurate Bible translations, and refuse to complement masculine language with biblical feminine images of God, we are promoting the idea that God is male and that, therefore, males are preeminent. She asserts that we must look to the Bible as a whole and acknowledge that the Bible does not imply that God is male, nor does it sanction patriarchy. The issues arise when our church communities only hear masculine language and male metaphors for God and are then driven to ask if there is something fundamentally inferior with being female. She poignantly states that our careless use of language continues to promote an unbiblical subordination of women, and, more importantly, it obscures the character of God.²¹

Hope for the Future

In summary: while exclusive male-gendered terms and imagery for God have become the norm of our day, the Bible uses both male and female terms and imagery for God. Additionally, the church has historically upheld the use of both masculine and feminine terms for God. It is only within our modern era that the practice has become virtually non-existent.

Language has power. Labels such as "he" and "she" affect our perception. Eventually, those labels become invisible. Once we have internalized God as "he," we buy into the idea of male spiritual hierarchy—an idea which is then reflected in our church structures and practices.

We can conclude that our perception of God as male influences a woman's choice to go into ministry leadership. Her brain has already genderized religious authority as "male." That label will prompt hesitation about whether "she" has any right to step into religious authority.

However, hope is not lost. The rising statistics of female clergy in Finland and Sweden give us hope that returning to the biblical and historical practice of using both masculine and feminine imagery for God—or choosing gender-neutral terms—could have a positive impact on the number of women pursuing leadership in Christian ministry.

Notes

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Growing an Egalitarian Footprint in South America

Latin America is "a portrayal of negative effects of high levels of patriarchy".¹ "As successful as religious actors have been in pushing Latin America towards democracy, justice, human rights, and issues of gender inequality seems to have been left behind."

1. <https://digitalworks.union.edu/theses/123/>

CBE's 2023 international conference in São Paulo, Brazil, helped us begin a movement in South America to set the record straight on what the Bible teaches about women's biblical equality. We plan to continue that momentum with CBE's 2025 international conference in South America. Brazilian egalitarians are eager to attend the conference to build alliances and help with egalitarian momentum in South America.

It is crucial that we provide scholarships so more people can attend the conference in South America. The scholarships will be used to bring in students, pastors, and others who cannot afford to pay the registration fee. Understanding women's biblical value and equality is essential to empowering their life, work, and studies.



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